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THE ROUND TABLE

A BASIS FOR ADVANCED FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

The plan for composition work which I shall describe here is designed for the second half of the Freshman year in college. It presupposes a thorough drill during the first half-year in the principles of exposition and the practices of good use, and also in original composition. The second half-year I devote to familiarizing the student with vivid prose style in a series of essays which present to the student a fairly consecutive view of the more important productions in English literature. I have used for this purpose a series of essays by Hazlitt which have been conveniently brought together in one volume. In order to give definiteness to the work and make it disciplinary and productive of results I have had each student follow the scheme suggested below with regard to each essay. After each essay one or more of the most easily grasped productions by the author were read and discussed from the student's point of view in the light of the comments in the essay. Hazlitt is not impeccable in style, but he is vivid, full of imagination, audacious, and admirably designed to illustrate principles of interest in prose-writing.

In the course the following essays were read, each being followed by a study of a specimen of the work of the writer discussed in the essay: "The Age of Elizabeth" (*Antony and Cleopatra*), "Spenser" (short selections from the *Faerie Queene*), "Shakespeare" (*A Mid-Summer Night's Dream*, *Twelfth Night*), "Milton" (*Paradise Lost*, I and II), "Pope" (*Epistle to Dr. Arbuthnot* and *The Rape of the Lock*), "On the Periodical Essayists" (selections from the Everyman Library *Century of English Essays*), "Mr. Wordsworth" and "Mr. Coleridge" (selections), "Mr. Southey," "Elia," and "Sir Walter Scott" (selections and reference to *Ivanhoe* previously read), "Lord Byron" (selections), "My First Acquaintance with Poets." Any other similar consecutive series of essays written in a vivid, vital prose and covering a broad period with which the student should early acquire familiarity would have served. The actual assignments were determined, in the present case, by the convenience of having the essays all included in a single volume.

The method of building upon this reading the composition work in the course was briefly as follows:

1. *Précis*: First, the student was to write in original words a sentence summarizing the thought of every paragraph and indicate by numerals in the margin the main divisions of thought. Next, on the basis of these sentences, he was to form a paragraph summarizing the content of the essay. Finally, he was to re-write this summary with attention to the form of the paragraph: structure, transition, etc.

2. Next, the student was to copy from the essay five sentences which seemed to him for some reason striking or effective. He was to be prepared to state clearly the reasons for making the selections. Exact references were required.

3. He was to list new or unfamiliar words (ten at least), give definitions from the dictionary, and use each correctly in an original sentence which made the meaning apparent.

4. He was then in his own words to express two new ideas suggested to him by the essay.

5. Occasionally, the student was called upon to copy sentences illustrating different principles of punctuation and to give the rules.

6. It should be added that all written work was discussed in conference and kept on file in notebook covers.

At first students are inclined to rebel at the formalism of the method. If they are taken into the teacher's confidence and made to understand what it is that is being aimed at, I have found them to enter into the work with a good deal of interest. Of course the work is distributed over the necessary number of periods, and no student is expected to perform the whole process of analysis here suggested at one time. The method depends largely for its success upon the remarkable power Hazlitt has of stimulating the imagination. Of course the teacher must help. When all is said and done, the student has been spared a possible antipathy to a writer for whom he should feel an admiration and liking. If the analyzing method kills for him all interest in Hazlitt, no great harm has been done. The illustrative examples are not subjected to this narrow examination. The value of the use of the *précis* as a thought-building discipline is recognized generally, but not so widely perhaps as it should be. Everyone will recall John Stuart Mill's account of his early training in making digests for his father. The student was asked to copy five sentences which seemed to him effective for the purpose of setting up echoes of good style in his mind. It is Matthew Arnold's "touchstone" method applied to prose. The student will frequently pick out bizarre specimens, but with a little training he learns to look for sentences which are powerful in wording, full of vivid imagery, or suggestive in phrase-

ology, and to understand why they are effective. He gradually builds up by himself a case book on style. It is unnecessary to comment upon the listing of unfamiliar words beyond the fact that Hazlitt's vocabulary is not usually beyond what the student should familiarize himself with, and it is furthermore rich and vigorous. The student at first has difficulty in finding two new ideas suggested by the reading. The exercise is worth while if it does nothing more than impress upon the student's mind the painful fact that the number of our original ideas is lamentably small. It may, however, help him to arrive at that kind of constructive reading which every author hopes for.

When the course is done, the students will know something about some of our most vital literature. They will also be familiar with vivid prose to an extent that will enable them to recognize it and in some particulars perhaps in their own way to imitate it. They will have increased their vocabulary, and their exact knowledge of the meaning of words, and have worked out for themselves some of the principles of style.

Most of all they will have learned how to read, how to "tear the heart out of a paragraph," to use Bliss Perry's admirable phrase, and to know when they do not understand what they have read, something the ordinary student is strangely unable to do, being used to comprehending little more than half of what he reads. I have found that students soon begin to ask what different sentences mean exactly, to question Hazlitt's accuracy of phrase, the punctuation, the sentence structure, and thought organization. I will say merely that they begin to do these things. They have at all events been exposed to vital writing, made to think it through, and to imprint on their minds bold figures and luminous ideas.

M. ELLWOOD SMITH

OREGON AGRICULTURAL COLLEGE
CORVALLIS, ORE.

THE RIVERBANK THEATER

"When Drama went indoors it died. Drama and Architecture must have the sun on them to live."—Gordon Craig.

With the way prepared as it was during war time, and the needs of the people during peace, The Brackenridge High School, San Antonio, Texas, gave an impetus to community drama when they developed the unique Riverbank Theater on the school grounds, for the use of the community, and produced Mackaye's *Jeanne D'Arc* as a magnificent drama-pageant, thereby vitalizing past ages and reinterpreting to